

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 DAMASC 00978 171043Z
ACTION NODS-00

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /001 W
-----064613 171053Z /16

O 170902Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6920
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
WHITE HOUSE IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T JAMASCUS 0978

EXDIS TREAT AS NODIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, SY, US, SOPN
SUBJ: SUGGESTED PRESS GUIDANCE ON ATHERTON ITINERARY

REF: DAMASCUS 0952

1. IF KHADDAM'S POSITION OF OPPOSITION TO ATHERTON'S VISIT
(REFTTEL) PROVES TO BE ASSAD'S, I RECOGNIZE THAT QUESTION ABOUT
NON-INCLUSION OF SYRIA WILL BE INEVITABLE WHEN DEPARTMENT
ANNOUNCES ATHERTONITINERARY. I URGE WE AVOID A BLUNT
STATEMENT THAT SYRIA FINDS IT INCONVENIENT FOR HIM TO COME.

MY REASONS ARE THESE:

A) I AM REASONABLY CERTAIN THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT WILL MAKE
NO PUBLIC STATEMENT ABOUT ATHERTON'S NOT VISITING DAMASCUS.
IF WE DO, IT WILL ONLY EXACERBATE A DIFFERENCE WE HAVE NO
INTEREST IN HIGHLIGHTING, PARTICULARLY SINCE COMING MONTHS

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MAY OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR US TO TRY TO BRING SYRIA BACK
INTO THE PEACE PROCESS.

B) OUR PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTWILL BE A SIGNAL TO SYRIAN
PEOPLE AND SECOND LEVEL OFFICIALS THROUGHOUT THE GOVERNMENT,
WITH WHOM WE DEAL DAILY AND WHO ARE ADEPT AT READING THE
TEA LEAVES TO DETERMINE THEIR OWN GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES,

THAT THEY SHOULD TAKE A CERTAIN DISTANCE FROM THE UNITED STATES. THIS IS NOT A MESSAGE WHICH ASSAD AND KHADDAM WISH TO SEND, BUT THROUGH INADVERTANCE WE MAY FIND OURSELVES SENDING IT FOR THEM AND HURTING OUR OWN RELATIONS IN THE PROCESS.

2. WE WILL OF COURSE WISH TO AVOID THE OPPOSITE IMPRESSION THAT WE ARE WRITING OFF SYRIA, BUT THIS CAN BE DONE BY PRIVATELY INFORMING AREA LEADERS OF SYRIA'S DECISION. IT DOES NOT REQUIRE A PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT.

3. WHEN THE QUESTION IS ASKED, THEREFORE, I WOULD HOPE WE COULD REPLY ALONG THE FOLLOWING LINES:

Q. IS MR. ATHERTON GOING TO VISIT SYRIA;

A. "A VISIT TO SYRIA AT SOME APPROPRIATE TIME IN THE NEGOTIATIONS IS CERTAINLY NOT EXCLUDED BUT HE HAS NO PRESENT PLANS TO GO TO DAMASCUS."

Q. DOES THAT MEAN WE ARE WRITING OFF SYRIA AS FAR AS THE

CURRENT PEACE INITIATIVE GOES?

A. "NO, NOT AT ALL. THE UNITED STATES CONTINUES TO FAVOR A COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION TO THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT. WE HAVE BEEN KEEPING SYRIA STADILY INFORMED OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AND HOPE THAT IN THE FUTURE SYRIA'S LEADERS WILL SEE IT IN THEIR INTEREST TO REJOIN THE PROCESS".

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4. YOUR MESSAGE STATE 42286 ARRIVED AS FOREGOING ABOUT TO BE TRANSMITTED. I THINK IT TAKES JUST THE RIGHT LINE FOR ANOTHER LOW KEY DISCUSSION OF THE SUBJECT WITH KHADDAM. IT REINFORCES MY CONCERN THAT WE SHOULD BE VERY CAREFUL IN HANDLING PRESS QUESTION ON YOUR VISIT.

MURPHY

SECRET

NNN

Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ITINERARY, INSTRUCTIONS, POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, PEACE, VISITS, THE PRESS, PRESS RELEASES, NEGOTIATIONS, CAT-B
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 17 feb 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC00978
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: EXDIS TREAT AS NODIS
Executive Order: GS
Errors: n/a
Expiration:
Film Number: P850083-2374, N780002-0614
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780243/aaaabjyg.tel
Line Count: 100
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 53fda2d4-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NODS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: NODIS, ONLY
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: NODIS
Reference: 78 DAMASCUS 952
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 20 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3565038
Secure: OPEN
Status: <DBA CHANGED> MCM 20040616; <DBA CHANGED> MCM 20040616
Subject: SUGGESTED PRESS GUIDANCE ON ATHERTON ITINERARY
TAGS: PEPR, SOPN, OVIP, PBOR, XF, SY, US, (ATHERTON, ALFRED L)
To: STATE AMMAN
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/53fda2d4-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014